APHIS Factsheet

Veterinary Services April 2007

Protecting America From Foot-and-Mouth Disease and Other High-Consequence Livestock Diseases

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) is responsible for protecting U.S. livestock resources from the introduction of harmful, foreign pests and diseases. APHIS works to keep livestock healthy by conducting pest and disease education, exclusion, detection, and eradication activities. Outbreaks of foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) occur regularly in many other areas of the world and serve to underscore the importance of APHIS' animal health safeguarding activities. These activities are critical to keeping FMD and other high-consequence livestock diseases out of the United States.

What is FMD?

FMD is a severe, highly contagious viral disease of cattle, swine, sheep, and other cloven-hooved animals. It is characterized by fever and blister-like lesions and erosions on the tongue and lips, in the mouth, on the teats, and between the hooves of affected animals. Most animals recover from FMD infection, but the disease leaves them debilitated. It also causes severe losses in the production of meat and milk. FMD is not recognized as a zoonotic disease.

Due to its ability to spread rapidly among animals, and because it has grave economic as well as clinical consequences, FMD is one of the animal diseases that livestock owners dread most. The FMD virus can persist in contaminated fodder and the environment for many weeks, depending on the temperature and other conditions. There are 7 separate types of the FMD virus, with more than 60 subtypes. Immunity to one type of the virus does not protect an animal against other types.

FMD can be spread by animals, people, or materials that bring the virus into physical contact with susceptible animals. There has not been an FMD outbreak in the United States since 1929. However, the disease is considered widespread in parts of Africa, Asia, Europe, and South America.

What is APHIS Doing to Keep FMD Out of the United States?

APHIS vigilantly and continuously monitors for FMD worldwide. APHIS stations veterinarians overseas to monitor FMD, to provide technical information and resources to help countries control and eradicate the disease, and to reduce the risk of FMD's spread to the United States. Whenever FMD outbreaks occur, APHIS initiates regulatory action to prohibit the importation of live ruminants and swine and many animal products from the FMD-affected countries.

APHIS works directly with Federal partners, including the Department of Homeland Security's Customs and Border Protection, to screen cargo containing animal products and by-products of concern and to prohibit travelers from carrying into the United States any agricultural products that could spread FMD virus or other harmful agricultural pests and disease agents. Accordingly, passengers must declare upon entry all food items and other material of plant or animal origin in their possession. Failure to declare any items may result in delays and fines of up to $1,000 for a first-time offense, and potentially as high as $50,000. Travelers must also report recent visits to farms or other livestock facilities taken prior to their arrival in the United States.

APHIS also works with the U.S. Armed Forces to ensure the cleaning and disinfection of military vehicles and equipment prior to returning to the United States from international duty.

As part of its FMD public education campaign, APHIS disseminates information about the disease to USDA partners in industry and in State and local organizations in the United States. APHIS officials post advisory signs in airports and broadcast public service announcements to inform the public about this important issue and steps they can take to prevent FMD from entering the United States. APHIS also works with the air transportation and travel industries to raise awareness among travelers and airline passengers and crews about the risk of inadvertently spreading the FMD virus.

In addition, Federal and State animal health officials have worked to inform private veterinarians to ensure heightened monitoring of domestic livestock for FMD. APHIS has response plans in the event the disease is detected in the United States (please refer to the APHIS Factsheet on Emergency Response to FMD and Other Foreign Animal Diseases).

What Does APHIS Do to Prevent the Introduction of Other High-Consequence Livestock Diseases?
All of the activities that APHIS currently conducts to keep FMD out of the United States are the same ones that the Agency uses to prevent the introduction of other harmful and high-consequence livestock diseases. Other foreign animal diseases of concern include: African swine fever, African horse sickness, bovine spongiform encephalopathy, classical swine fever (hog cholera), contagious bovine pleuropneumonia, exotic Newcastle disease, highly pathogenic avian influenza, Rift Valley fever, rinderpest, and swine vesicular disease, among others.

What Can You Do to Help?
The success of APHIS' efforts to keep FMD and other harmful livestock diseases out of the United States is dependent upon the support and cooperation of many people, including members of the livestock industry and supporting industries, veterinary practitioners, State and local government officials, Federal officials from other agencies and departments, and the general public.

APHIS encourages livestock owners, livestock transport and slaughter personnel, and private veterinary practitioners to report any unusual animal health conditions to State or local veterinary officials. This is especially important if signs of illness are observed in animals that have had contact with other animals at markets, in feedlots, or at fairgrounds.

Travelers can help by making sure they do not bring in prohibited food items or other products, soiled footwear, or soiled clothing items that could present a risk of transmitting the FMD virus or other disease agents. When you travel overseas, make sure that luggage, packages, and mail are free of any prohibited meats, dairy products, and other at-risk materials before bringing or sending them to the United States.

In addition, travelers to foreign countries should make note of visits to farms, ranches, or other areas where livestock are raised or kept. Visits to zoos, circuses, fairs, and other facilities and events where livestock and animals are exhibited should also be noted. All such visits should be reported on the U.S. Customs Declaration Form upon return to the United States by answering "yes" to question number 11.d. ("Are you bringing with you: soil or have you visited a farm/ranch/pasture outside the United States?") or to question number 12 ("Have you or any family members traveling with you been in close proximity of (such as touching or handling) livestock outside the United States?"). Remember, if in doubt, check "yes"!

If you visited a farm or had any contact with livestock on your trip, you should avoid all contact with livestock, zoo animals, or wildlife for 5 days after your return to the United States.

Dogs and cats cannot become infected with FMD. Nevertheless, travelers returning to the United States with pet dogs or cats that had contact with livestock or areas frequented by livestock must make sure the pet's feet, fur, and bedding are free of any excessive dirt or mud. Pet bedding should not contain straw, hay, or other natural bedding. The pet should be bathed as soon as it reaches its final destination and be kept separate and apart from all livestock for at least 5 days after entry into the United States.

Horses can be imported from FMD-affected countries as long as the exporting country complies with the FMD-preventive procedures required by APHIS. Upon entry into the United States, additional precautions are taken. For instance, horses from affected countries are wiped down with a disinfectant solution. Shipping crates, transportation vehicles, tack and other equipment, as well as footwear of personnel accompanying horses, must be cleaned and disinfected. Excess feed, hay, straw, and manure that arrive with a horse are incinerated.

Additional Information
For more information about FMD, contact:
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